The Fourth Church Pulpit

A MEDITATION FOR CHRISTMAS DAY

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Every five or six years Christmas Day comes on a Sunday, and while it has long been the custom of this church to hold a service of divine worship on December 25, no matter what day of the week it is, that is not the custom in most places.

In fact, in most of the outposts of Christendom in this culture, hundreds of thousands of local congregations and parishes of all types and places and sizes, there occurs shortly after midnight on the night before Christmas, a kind of ecclesiastical collapse. We have told the story, sung the carols, watched the pageant, enjoyed the cantata, the preacher has said all he or she knows how to say and everyone turns attention to the family and personal celebration of Christmas Day with a great sigh of relief.

I heard about a Presbyterian Church in which the Session at its December meeting was talking about the fact that Christmas fell on a Sunday this year, and they'd have to make sure the building was open and fire up the furnace and get ushers and someone to take up the offering. The more they talked the more it became apparent that none of them planned to be there. And so they canceled worship on Christmas! When the word got out some of the older members took a dim view of that compromise. The most recent word is that they went home and thought about it some more, called a special meeting and rescinded their action and are, even now I assume, happily in their pews, rather than home opening gifts and drinking coffee.

When they were younger, my own youngsters used to say, "We aren't going to have church on Christmas, are we?" The follow-up question, when I told them the news, that "Yes, we were going to have church on Christmas," and that "it was a particularly appropriate thing to do," was always, "You aren't going to preach, are you?"

The answer, by the way, comes in good news and bad news. First, the bad news. Yes, I'm going to preach. The good news is that I'm not going to preach for very long.

I keep a special file for Christmas on Sunday and one of my favorite items is in there. I've used it every time Christmas comes on Sunday. The last time here, if you're interested, was December 25, 1988. It is by the late Reinhold Niebhur, one of the most distinguished Christian thinkers of the century. Niebhur taught for years at Union Theological Seminary in New York, was a superb scholar and teacher, and he was also a good preacher. The essay he wrote, in 1933, is "A Christmas Service in Retrospect."

> "I went to church in the cathedral on Christmas Day. It is one of the few days of the year in which I am able to attend church without preaching. On that day I prefer a liturgical church with as little sermon as possible. It is not that I don't like to hear anyone but myself preach. I merely dislike most Christmas and Easter sermons. Only poets can do justice to the Christmas and Easter stories and there are not many poets in the pulpit. It is better, therefore to be satisfied with the symbolic presentation of the poetry in hymns, anthems and liturgy."

And then the scholar takes over and Niebhur explains what he means:

> "I suppose it is necessary and inevitable that the poetry of religion should be expressed in rational terms, but something is always lost in the rationalization. Dogma is rationally petrified poetry which destroys part of the truth."

And so, this morning, Christmas Day, we have experienced the truth, in poetry and music and I want to say just two things.

The first is: God comes into life in ordinary events, ordinary relationships, ordinary experiences. You and I spend most of our lives waiting for something to happen to us spiritually, something extraordinary. We long for a unmistakable word from God — about what to do with our lives. We long for some tangible experience of God's reality, some vision, some overwhelming religious experience in which the heavens open and God speaks our name and we know at last. And there is about a lot of popular religion a propensity to satisfy that desire — to create or induce something spectacularly spiritual.

Christmas, on the other hand, is about ordinary things: a man and a woman, a journey, a crowded inn, a stable, a birth, common folk milling about. It's an everyday street scene, notable for its ordinariness. And the assertion is that this modest tableau contains the heart and soul and reality of God. God's son was given to a family. God's own son grew up in a community and learned his lessons in the synagogue, and his craft in his father's shop, and his prayers at his mother's knee. And suddenly, in the midst of all that holy ordinariness, everything looks different. Suddenly the ordinariness of your life and mine, the ordinariness of our work, our relationships, our hopes and dreams — suddenly all of it has divine potential, all of it available to God for God's purposes. Suddenly, every birth contains something of the life of God, every experience of human love reflects something of God's love, every gesture of kindness, self-sacrifice, generosity, compassion, bears something of the reality of God, the presence of God in life.

That's first — the ordinary is where God chooses to reveal love.

Second — a simple idea. A very important part of you is your spirit, your soul, your heart. We have the capacity for reason, logical thought. It is what allowed our ancestors to evolve beyond the limitations of other beings in the created order ... intelligence, reason. But there is also about us a capacity for mystery and awe and wonder. "We are," St. Augustine said, and you have heard me quote him repeatedly recently, "restless until we rest in God." "Thou hast made our hearts restless until they rest in thee" is the way he put it. There is about us a capacity for hope, trust, faith. We are, Judith Krantz said, "wired for love."

We live in a culture and a time when that capacity, which I will call spirituality, is ignored, or at least relegated to a distant place behind our reason, our intellect. "Cogito ergo sum," — "I think therefore I am," the philosopher, Descartes, said and he was only half right. William Sloane Coffin says the Christian correction to that is "Amo ergo sum," "I love, therefore I am."

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, God apparently wanted to address something in us in addition to our minds. It could have been a wonderfully precise philosophic argument. God could have entered human history in the life of a great philosopher.

God came in a tender, human event which has a way, and always has, of penetrating our intellectual veneer, and lowering our emotional barriers and even the brightest of us find that we spend most of December with a lump in our throat and tears in our eyes.

God wants us not only to think better but to be better: not just to understand the word, but to experience the fullness of our humanity. God wants us to be children of God — and God goes about it by getting to our hearts. God wants us to know God, but also to be changed, be converted, reformed, remade, and to live in love and compassion with our neighbors.

Frederick Buechner, who does know about the poetry of faith, put it this way:

> "Come and behold him. In whatever way seems right to you and at whatever time, come to him with your empty hands. The great promise is that to come to him who was born at Bethlehem is to find coming to birth within ourselves something stronger, braver, gladder and kinder and holier than ever we knew before or that ever we could have known without him." [*The Hungering Dark*, p. 55]

May that be so for you and yours, December 25, 1994.

May you be newly open to God's presence in the ordinariness of your life.

May all your relationships, experiences become places where God enters.

And may you attend to that most precious part of yourself: your spirit, your heart.

God has come to us in the birth of the child.

God has blessed our humanness and made sacred the ordinariness of our lives.

God has come to each of us, personally.

> "O Holy Child of Bethlehem,
> Descend to us, we pray;
> Cast out our sin and enter in,
> Be born in us today."

Amen.